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When Allen Dulles turned Eisenhower's Air Force One into a spy plane

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Ike's most important trip never got off the ground. For months he had been looking forward to his visit to Moscow in the spring of 1960 — the first such presidential trip in history and prompted, at least in part, by Nikita Khrushchev's flamboyant tour of the United States in September 1959. Eisenhower passed the word that he preferred to go to Russia aboard one of the spanking-new jet airliners, instead of the old propellor-driven Columbine III he had been using. Khrushchev had come to America in a giant TU-114 turboprop, a spectacle that both impressed and embarrassed American officials. Now it would be Ike's turn at the game of aerial one-upmanship — and the CIA's.

As director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Allen Dulles was consumed by a need to penetrate the closed Communist empire directed from Moscow, which in the 1950s was thought to be pressing its Stalinist ambition of world domination. The Soviet Union, with its air fleet and a growing arsenal of atomic missiles, was capable of launching surprise attacks against an "open" United States. Moreover, from behind the Iron Curtain, the Kremlin possessed the capacity of mounting blackmail campaigns against the West by boasting of nuclear muscle that might be more fiction than fact.

Out of Dulles's innovative mind came the 1954 decision to build 30 high-altitude aircraft — the U-2 program — to conduct secret photo reconnaissance flights over the Soviet Union and its East European puppet states. Ike approved, although with reservations.

Then, out of Dulles's mind came another daring plan. The president's own aircraft was to be outfitted as a spy plane. There is no indication that Eisenhower approved this clandestine undertaking. Indeed, it is doubtful that he even knew about it.

Project Lida Rose was born inside the CIA late in 1959. The name was borrowed from a hit song in the Broadway show "Music Man" — a tune, ironically, that Ike liked.

The interior of one of the Boeing 707s had been specially configured to serve the president and other high officers of the government. With clearance from Defense Secretary Thomas S. Gates Jr. and top brass of the Air Force, it soon became the object of attention by a CIA team that quietly attached itself to the Special Air Missions Unit at Andrews Air Force Base.

From Dulles's viewpoint, the plan made sense. For three years, commencing in 1956, U-2 reconnaissance flights had been bringing back marvelous photographs of the Soviet countryside, especially of Soviet missile launching sites, radar installations, secret airfields, railroad and shipping centers, shipyard activity, oil refineries and exploration, industrial plants and troop and tank concentrations. Taken from altitudes in excess of 50,000 feet, where the U-2 was safe from Soviet fighter interception and antiaircraft, the pictures provided both corroboration and, sometimes, the refutation of intelligence reports supplied by agents outside the Soviet Union.

Eisenhower himself exclaimed over the excellence of the photos. The U-2 cameras were of such high quality that test pictures taken 70,000 feet above American cities made it possible to count automobiles on the streets and spot the lines marking the parking areas for individual cars. Just as important as the positive information of what the Soviets did have by way of offensive military capability was the negative information of what they did not have. That robbed the Kremlin of a most powerful psychological weapon — the chance to exploit the ignorance and fears of the West.

But for all of their excellence, the U-2 photos remained pictures taken at very high altitudes. A plane like the president's could get much closer to the subject matter. Since Khrushchev had toured the United States, it was quite likely that Eisenhower not only would see Moscow but probably Leningrad, the Black Sea area, and perhaps even a point or two east of the Urals. It would be extremely valuable if the president's aircraft could photograph Soviet antimissile defense installations around the cities he would visit. Indeed, even aerial photos of bridges, road networks, rail lines and the physical layout of Moscow and other cities would be valuable to the CIA and the Defense Department. Moreover, it was the intention of the Eisenhower administration to allow other high-ranking persons in the government — the secretaries of Defense and State, and top military officers — to use the new Boeing on overseas trips whenever Eisenhower didn't need it. Photographs acquired on such flights would be useful, too. So went the reasoning for surreptitiously turning the new member of the presidential fleet into a spy plane.

Dulles had not necessarily set out to deceive the president. But sometimes, as he knew, it was a boon to political superiors if they were kept in the dark. It gave them a valuable commodity called "deniability" in event some outlandish piece of espionage was uncovered by the other side. Then they could, in all honesty, claim innocence of whatever had happened. Deniability was something Eisenhower didn't have — and could have used — on May 1, 1960, the day that U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers was shot down over Russia.

The handsome Boeing was moved to a secluded hangar where, under tight security, the installation of high-resolution cameras and electronic control mechanisms was begun. With

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